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Exploring Foundational Reading Skill Instruction in K–12 Schools

Findings from the 2023 American Instructional Resources Survey

Results from the 2022 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the only nationally administered measure of academic achievement in the United States, showed that 37 percent of fourth-grade students across the country scored below the NAEP Basic level in reading (Nation’s Report Card, undated). These results reflect a trend in reading achievement going back to the early 1990s; many nine-year-olds in the United States are not proficient

KEY FINDINGS

- At least two-thirds of kindergarten through grade 5 teachers and one-third of middle and high school teachers who teach English language arts (ELA) reported frequently engaging their students in foundational reading activities.
- Secondary ELA teachers who served schools with a majority students of color and who taught classes that consist of more than 10 percent English learners (ELs) were more likely to report that their students frequently engaged in foundational reading activities.
- Elementary ELA teachers in classrooms in which 10 percent to 49 percent of students have Individualized Education Programs were less likely to frequently engage their students in foundational reading activities.
- Elementary teachers in states with and without legislation relating to reading instruction were equally likely to report frequently engaging their students in foundational reading activities.
- Secondary ELA teachers in states with reading legislation were significantly more likely to report frequently engaging their students in these activities compared with secondary ELA teachers in other states, even though only one-quarter of states with these laws include requirements around secondary ELA instruction.

readers (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023b). The high share of struggling readers identified through the NAEP assessment is also reflected in parents' concerns about their children's education. In a national survey conducted in October 2023, almost half of parents with children in grades K–5 reported that their child has struggled or is struggling to learn to read (IMPACT Research, 2023).

State leaders have undertaken several policy initiatives in the past few decades to address the flagging reading scores among America's students. The first, known as the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), focuses on *what* students learn (Porter et al., 2011). Launched in 2009, the CCSS introduced common learning standards that benchmark the knowledge and skills that students should have mastered at each grade level. Importantly, the English Language Arts (ELA) standards include a set of foundational reading skills for elementary grades (K–5). Research suggests that these foundational skills (print concepts, phonological awareness, phonics and word recognition, and fluency) are core components of learning how to read and that mastery of these skills requires explicit instruction for many students (National Reading Panel, 2000).

Recently, many states have also passed legislation that addresses *how* students learn. The passage of these laws reflects a swing in the reading debate pendulum away from whole language instruction and toward explicit and systematic instruction in the relationship between letters and sound and how to blend sounds to form words. Since 2013, more than half of states have passed bills that place new requirements around reading instruction, such as aligning professional development, coaching, and teacher preparation to evidence-based practices; providing

teachers with high-quality instructional materials; and requiring teachers to engage in instructional strategies that are aligned to National Reading Panel recommendations (Neuman, Quintero, and Reist, 2023). Critically, many of these laws also provide additional funding to support this instruction. Studies evaluating the effectiveness of these laws have found promising results, with increases in ELA achievement in California (Novicoff and Dee, 2023), Michigan (Strunk et al., 2021), and Mississippi (Mumma and Winters, 2023).

As shown in Figure 1, slightly more than half of states have Common Core standards in place, and slightly more than half of states have also passed reading legislation as described above. Although the Common Core standards for ELA were initially adopted by 46 states (Kendall, 2012), currently only 30 still have the Common Core standards in place. However, in most states that repealed the CCSS over the past decade, the new standards are closely aligned with the key tenets of the CCSS (RAND Corporation, 2018). Both the Common Core foundational reading standards and many of the recent reading laws passed around the country emphasize the core components of evidence-based reading instruction. The bulk of the research indicates that teaching foundational reading skills improves reading outcomes for all students, including those from both low- and high-income backgrounds and both students who are typically developing and those with developmental delays (Ehri, Nunes, Willows, et al., 2001; Ehri, Nunes, Stahl, et al., 2001). However, vulnerable student groups—such as students of color (students who are not identified as White), those with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), or English learners (ELs)—might have less access to high-quality teachers, particularly those who have the training or supports to provide targeted reading instruction, and they might have less access to reading materials outside of school (Darling-Hammond, 2004; Gersten et al., 2020; McQuillan, 2006; Wong et al., 2017).

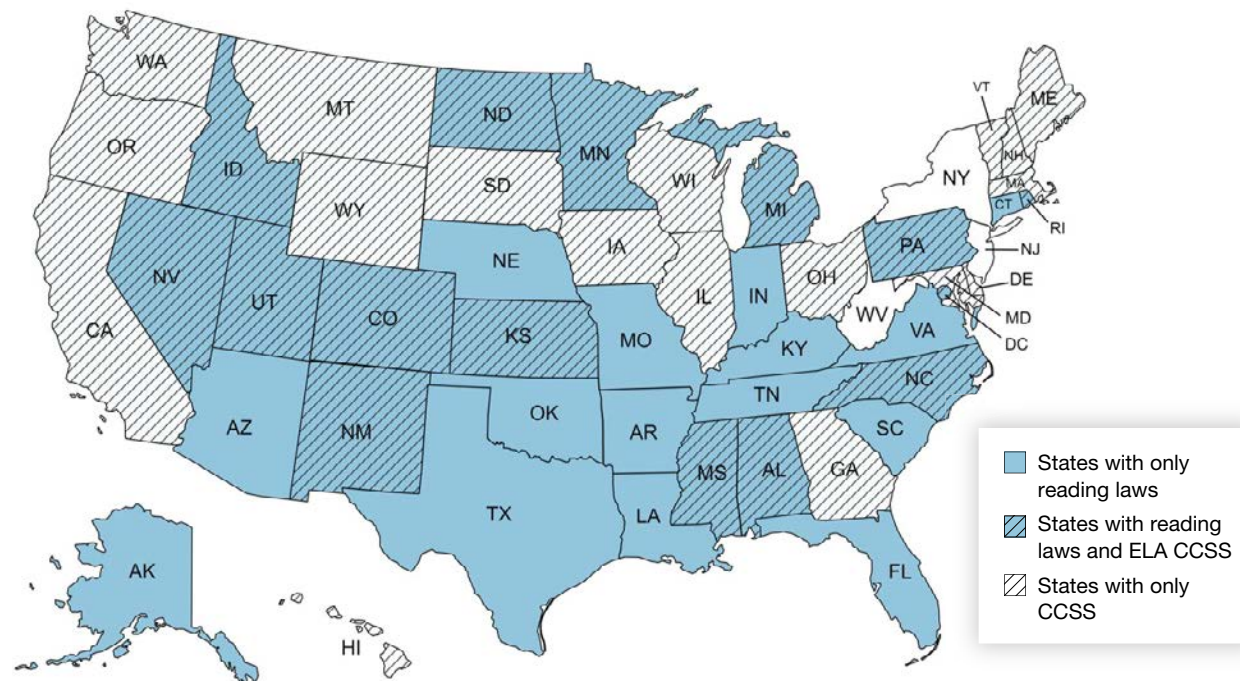
In light of these large-scale state-level policy shifts regarding reading instruction, more evidence on the *extent* to which teachers engage their students in developing foundational reading skills is needed. Moreover, little is known about whether

Abbreviations

AIRS	American Instructional Resources Survey
CCSS	Common Core State Standards
ELA	English language arts
EL	English learner
IEP	Individualized Education Program
NAEP	National Assessment of Educational Progress

FIGURE 1

States with Legislation Specifying Requirements Around Aligning Reading Instruction, Instructional Materials, or Professional Development to Evidence-Based Reading Approaches (i.e., Reading Laws) and States Using Common Core Standards for ELA in Spring 2023



SOURCES: Features information from Schwartz, 2023; National Council on Teacher Quality, 2024.

NOTE: This map displays the 30 states or jurisdictions that enacted policies specifying requirements around aligning reading instruction, instructional materials, or professional development to evidence-based reading approaches prior to the administration of the 2023 American Instructional Resource Survey (AIRS), which was administered to K–12 ELA teachers in April 2023. This map also displays the states using CCSS standards for ELA in spring 2023.

teachers serving higher proportions of students most likely to benefit from evidence-based reading approaches—such as ELs or students with IEPs—are exposing their students to activities that target foundational reading skills. Understanding the extent to which teachers engage their students in foundational reading activities across grades K–12 can inform state policymakers considering new initiatives or investments to improve reading instruction. To fill these gaps, we use nationally representative data collected in the spring 2023 American Instructional Resource Survey (AIRS). We asked ELA teachers how frequently they engage in four activities that target foundational reading skills to answer the following research questions:

1. What proportion of elementary and secondary ELA teachers frequently engage students in activities that promote print concepts, phonological awareness, phonics and word recognition, and fluency?
2. How does frequent engagement in these activities vary by the demographics of the students teachers serve, including the proportion of students of color, proportion of ELs, and the proportion of students with IEPs?
3. How does frequent engagement in these activities vary by whether teachers work in states with legislated requirements around reading instruction compared with teachers in states without these laws?

Overview of Data Sources and Methods in this Report

To examine teachers’ engagement of students in foundational reading activities, we use nationally representative data collected in the spring 2023 AIRS, which was administered to a probability-based sample of K–12 public school teachers who are part of the RAND American Teacher Panel. In this report, we focus on responses from ELA teachers across the country and examine variation in survey responses by the student characteristics of teachers’ classrooms and schools and their state policy context.

We asked 3,505 ELA teachers, comprising 1,574 departmentalized or general education elementary teachers and 1,931 secondary ELA teachers, “In the last five lessons you taught this class (i.e., the past week, if you teach every day), how often did you ask all students in your class to undertake any of the following activities or tasks for a substantial period of time (i.e., more than a few minutes)?”

For the purposes of this report, we focus on teachers’ reports of engaging their students in four reading activities. These activities, shown in Table 1, correspond to the four foundational reading skill domains for K–5 students set forth in the CCSS: print concepts, phonological awareness, phonics and word recognition, and fluency (Common Core State Stan-

dards Initiative, undated). Throughout this report, we refer to these four activities as *foundational reading activities*.

Importantly, these four measures do not comprehensively capture all the components of an effective reading instructional program for several reasons. First, our measures capture only a subset of the skills within each of the four domains for K–5. Second, we do not include measures that capture other Common Core ELA standards, such as reading standards for literature or informational text in K–5, or higher grade standards. Third, although reading is based on both oral and written language, we do not include measures that capture language or writing skills (see Foorman, Petscher, and Herrera, 2018; Kim, 2023; and Mehta et al., 2005). Rather, these measures provide a snapshot of whether teachers across all grades are engaging their students in foundational reading activities.

For each reading activity, teachers reported the frequency with which they engaged *all* of their students in the activity during their last five lessons. Teachers responded, “Never,” “1–2 lessons,” “3–4 lessons,” “Every lesson,” or “Not relevant or not appropriate for the grade/class I teach.” Note that this item asked about activities that all students engage in; it is likely that if teachers engaged only a subset of their students in these activities, this would not be

TABLE 1
Alignment Between the Common Core Reading Standards for Foundational Skills and Foundational Reading Activities Addressed in the 2023 AIRS

Common Core Reading Skill Domain	Common Core Reading Standards Foundational Skills	Foundational Reading Activity Addressed in the 2023 AIRS
Print concepts	Demonstrate understanding of the organization and basic features of print (e.g., follow words from left to right, recognize distinguishing features of a sentence) (K–1)	Practice the organization or basic features of print
Phonological awareness	Demonstrate understanding of spoken words, syllables, and sounds (phonemes) (K–1)	Identify units of oral language, such as words, syllables, onset and rime, or phonemes Manipulate (i.e., blend, rearrange) units of oral language, such as words, syllables, onset and rime, or phonemes
Phonics and word recognition	Know and apply grade-level phonics and word analysis skills in decoding words (K–5)	Apply phonics skills in recognizing or decoding words
Fluency	Read emergent-reader texts with purpose and understanding (K); read with sufficient accuracy and fluency to support comprehension (1–5)	Practice reading with fluency (i.e., accuracy, rate appropriate to text and task, or with expression)

captured in this measure. For this reason, we interpret these measures as representing a lower bound of the frequency with which students engage in these activities. We defined teachers as *frequently* engaging their students in an activity if they reported their students engaging in the activity in at least three of their last five lessons. If teachers responded “Never,” or “1–2 lessons,” we consider them as not frequently engaging their students in the activity. Teachers who replied “Not relevant or not appropriate for the grade/class I teach” or who did not respond to the item are excluded from our analysis. Because we asked about two items related to phonological awareness, we define teachers as frequently engaging their students in phonological awareness activities if they reported engaging in *either* identification or manipulation of units of oral language in at least three of their last five lessons.

To examine variation in the frequency with which ELA teachers engaged their students in these foundational reading activities, we compare teacher responses across several dimensions. First, we look at differences by grades taught by the teachers surveyed. Throughout this report, we refer to *elementary teachers* as teachers in grades K–5 and *secondary teachers* as teachers in grades 6–12. Among secondary teachers, we defined *middle school teachers* as teachers in grades 6–8 and *high school teachers* as teachers in grades 9–12.

Second, we explored whether teachers’ reports of engaging their students in foundational reading activities varied by the characteristics of the students in their schools and classrooms, including students’ race or ethnicity, English language proficiency, and disability status. We examined these characteristics along the following dimensions:

- To examine variation by student race, we compared ELA teachers in schools with 50 percent or more White students with teachers in schools with 50 percent or more students of color. This school-level measure is constructed using data from the 2020–2021 Common Core of Data (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023b).
- To explore variation by students’ English language proficiency, we compared teachers in

classrooms with 10 percent or fewer ELs with teachers in classrooms with more than 10 percent ELs. This classroom-level measure is constructed using teachers’ reported proportion of ELs in their classrooms. We constructed the groups as 10 percent or less or greater than 10 percent because about 10 percent of U.S. students are ELs (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023a).

- We also examined differences between teachers in classrooms in which 10 percent or fewer of students have an IEP compared with teachers in classrooms in which more than 10 percent of students have an IEP. Students with an IEP have a disability that interferes with their ability to learn at school, and their IEP is designed to meet their individual needs (Goepel, 2009). Again, we select 10 percent as our threshold because it is close to the national average of students with IEPs (15 percent) (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023c).

Third, we also examined differences by state policy context. We compared the responses of teachers in states with “reading laws” with the responses of teachers in states without such reading laws. We defined a state as having a *reading law* if it passed legislation requiring professional development or coaching aligned to evidence-based reading approaches, the use of high-quality instructional materials that includes the foundational components of reading, or the use of such instructional practices as interventions for struggling learners (Schwartz, 2024). Altogether, 30 states or jurisdictions passed one or more such reading laws before the administration of the AIRS in April 2023 (National Council on Teacher Quality, 2024; Schwartz, 2024). We did not include states that passed legislation *only* addressing teacher preparation and/or teacher licensure because these policies predominantly affect preservice and novice teachers, of which there were very few—only three—in our sample. We also did not include states that have legislation that only addresses dyslexia because nearly all states have passed such legislation (National Center on Improving Literacy, undated; Neuman, Quintero, and Reist, 2023).

To What Extent Do Elementary and Secondary ELA Teachers Frequently Engage Students in Foundational Reading Activities?

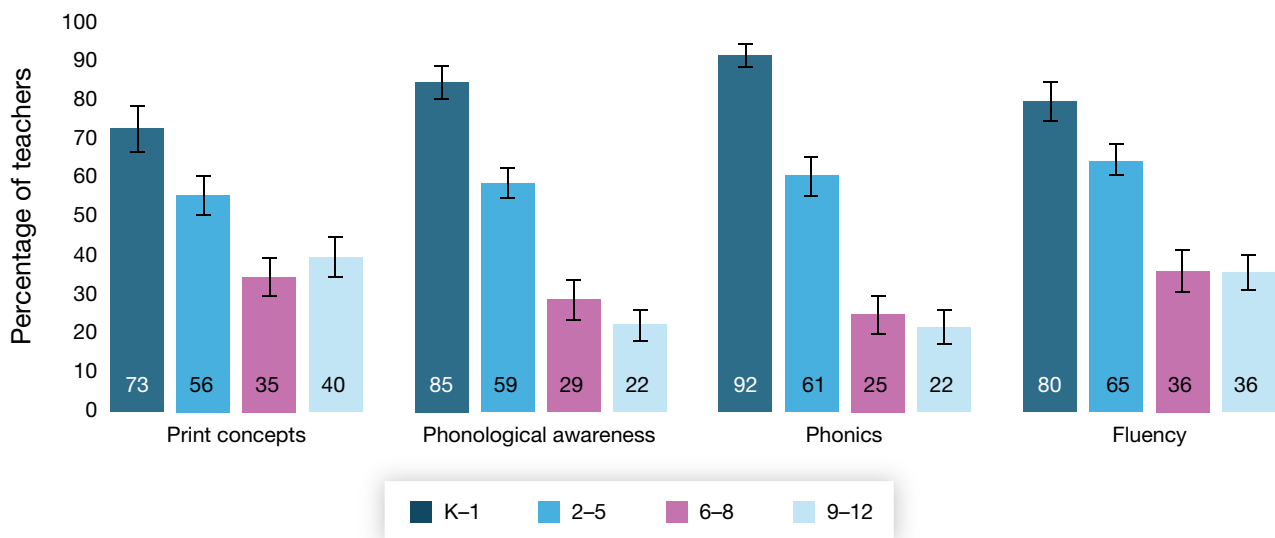
About Three-Quarters of Grades K–1 Teachers and 60 Percent of Grades 2–5 Teachers Reported Frequently Engaging Their Students in Foundational Reading Activities

About three-quarters or more of grades K–1 teachers reported that they frequently engage their students in each of the four activities we analyzed related to print concepts, phonological awareness, phonics and word recognition, and fluency (see Figure 2). In particular, nearly all teachers engaged their students in activities related to applying phonics skills in decoding words

(92 percent). These results align with the Common Core standards for early grades, which set an expectation that students in kindergarten and first grade demonstrate an understanding of print concepts, phonological awareness, phonics and word recognition, and fluency (Common Core State Standards Initiative, undated). However, because K–1 students are expected to focus on all four of the foundational aspects of reading so that they can reach mastery of these skills by the end of the third grade (Goldman, Snow, and Vaughn, 2016), it is surprising and perhaps concerning that as many as one-quarter of K–1 teachers are not frequently engaging students in these activities.

Fewer teachers in grades 2–5 reported frequently engaging their students in these foundational reading activities. Slightly more than half reported frequently engaging in activities related to print concepts (56 percent) and phonological awareness (59 percent).

FIGURE 2
Percentage of K–12 ELA Teachers Who Reported Frequently Engaging Students in Foundational Reading Activities (i.e., Three or More Times in the Last Five Lessons), by Grade Band



NOTE: This figure depicts response data from the following survey question: “In the last five lessons you taught this class (i.e., the past week, if you teach every day), how often did students engage in each of the following tasks, with or without your prompting?” Each bar represents the proportion of teachers who responded “3–4 lessons” or “every lesson.” Teachers who did not respond to the item or responded “Not relevant or not appropriate for the grade/class I teach” are excluded from the analysis. Print concepts is measured by the item “Practiced the organization or basic features of print.” Phonological awareness is measured by the items “Identified the units of oral language such as words, syllables, onset/rime, or phonemes” and “Manipulated units of oral language such as words, syllables, onset/rime, or phonemes.” Phonics is measured by the item “Applied phonics skills in recognizing or decoding words.” Fluency is measured by the item “Practiced reading with fluency (i.e., accuracy, rate appropriate to text and task, or with expression).” *n* = 418–424 for grades K–1 teachers; *n* = 1,084–1,116 for grades 2–5 teachers; *n* = 669–757 for grades 6–8 ELA teachers; *n* = 958–1,094 for grades 9–12 ELA teachers. Sample sizes are presented as a range because of variance in the number of respondents for each item. Black bars represent 95-percent confidence intervals.

These rates might be higher than expected given that Common Core standards expect students to have mastered these foundational reading skills by the end of first grade (Common Core State Standards Initiative, undated). Fewer grade 2–5 teachers—compared with K–1 teachers—reported frequently engaging their students in activities related to phonics and word recognition (61 percent) or fluency (65 percent) as well, both of which are grade 2–5 foundational skill standards.

As Many as One-Quarter to One-Third of Secondary ELA Teachers Reported Frequently Engaging Students in Foundational Reading Activities

Secondary ELA teachers were less likely than elementary ELA teachers to report frequently engaging their students in foundational reading activities related to print concepts, phonological awareness, phonics and word recognition, and fluency. Even so, a notable proportion of secondary ELA teachers, from 22 percent to 40 percent, reported frequently engaging their students in such practices. For example, more than one-third of middle and high school ELA teachers reported frequently engaging their students in activities related to print concepts. Similarly, more than one-quarter of middle and high school ELA teachers reported frequently engaging their students in activities related to phonological awareness. We find similarly high rates of teachers engaging students in activities targeting phonics and word recognition (22 percent to 25 percent) and fluency (36 percent) among middle and high school educators.

That such a relatively high proportion of secondary teachers engages in foundational reading activities might seem, at first blush, surprising. We propose a few potential explanations for these findings. First, the NAEP reading assessment has shown that about one-quarter of 8th-grade and 12th-grade students scored below the NAEP Basic level in reading for the past two decades, indicating that a sizeable portion of secondary students struggle with reading fluency and comprehension (Archer, Gleason, and Vachon, 2003; Hussar et al., 2020). Secondary teachers with struggling readers might feel the need to incorporate

foundational reading activities in their instruction. Second, secondary ELA teachers might have interpreted the wording of these foundational skill items differently than elementary teachers. For example, elementary teachers might have interpreted “reading with fluency” as reading with accuracy and at an appropriate rate, but secondary ELA teachers might have interpreted this item as reading with appropriate expression or fluency across disciplinary texts. Thus, we suggest that readers interpret these results with caution because we do not know how each teacher interpreted the survey items.

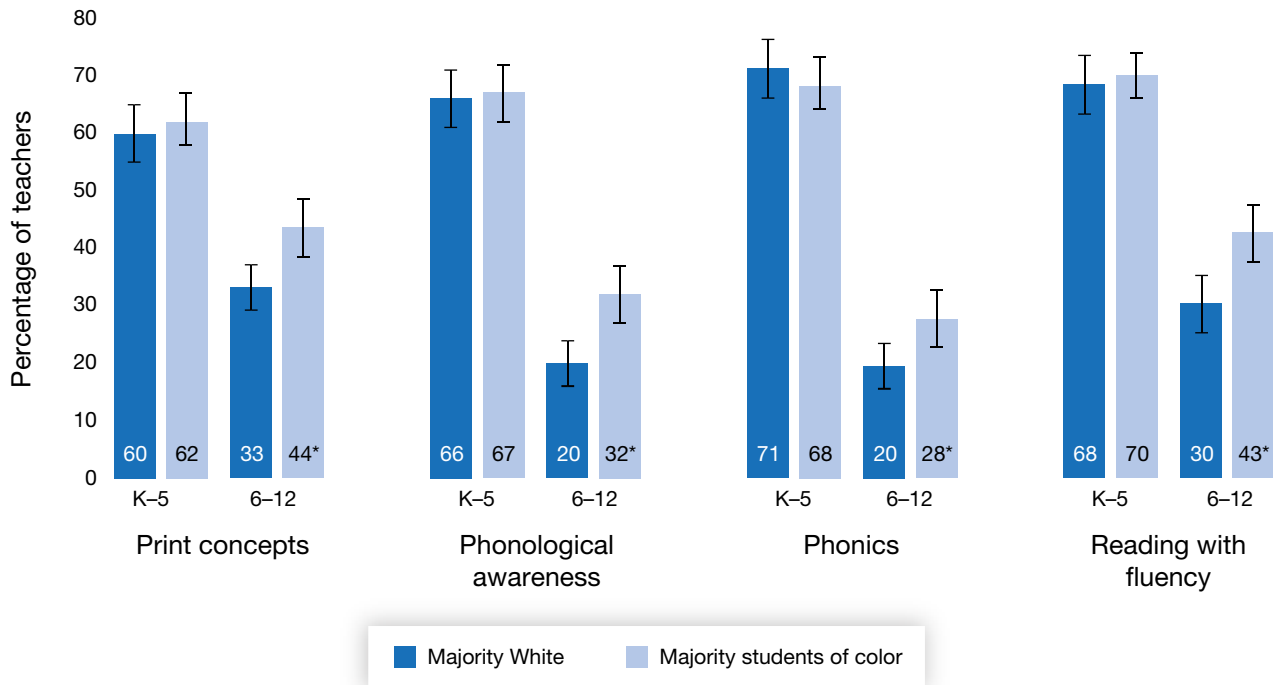
How Does Frequent Engagement of Students in Foundational Reading Activities Vary Based on the Demographics of Teachers’ Students?

Secondary ELA Teachers in Schools with a Majority of Students of Color Are More Likely to Engage Students in Foundational Reading Activities Compared with Their Counterparts in Schools with Majority White Students, Even After Accounting for School Poverty Level

Secondary ELA teachers in schools with 50 percent or more students of color were about 10 percentage points more likely than teachers in majority White schools to frequently engage their students in foundational reading activities (see Figure 3). These differences remained statistically significant and similar in magnitude when controlling for school-level poverty, which is measured with a binary indicator of whether 50 percent or more students in the school are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. In contrast, we found few differences among elementary teachers. Elementary teachers teaching in majority White schools and elementary teachers teaching in schools with a majority of students of color were equally as likely to frequently engage in foundational reading activities.

FIGURE 3

Percentage of Elementary and Secondary ELA Teachers Who Reported Frequently Engaging Students in Foundational Reading Activities in Majority White Schools and Schools with a Majority of Students of Color



NOTE: This figure depicts response data from the following survey question: “In the last five lessons you taught this class (i.e., the past week, if you teach every day), how often did students engage in each of the following tasks, with or without your prompting?” Each bar represents the proportion of teachers who responded “3–4 lessons” or “every lesson.” Teachers who did not respond to the item or responded “Not relevant or not appropriate for the grade/class I teach” are excluded from the analysis. Print concepts is measured by the item “Practiced the organization or basic features of print.” Phonological awareness is measured by the items “Identified the units of oral language such as words, syllables, onset/rime, or phonemes” and “Manipulated units of oral language such as words, syllables, onset/rime, or phonemes.” Phonics is measured by the item “Applied phonics skills in recognizing or decoding words.” Fluency is measured by the item “Practiced reading with fluency (i.e., accuracy, rate appropriate to text and task, or with expression).” $n = 1,492\text{--}1,520$ for elementary ELA teachers; $n = 1,607\text{--}1,828$ for secondary ELA teachers. Sample sizes are presented as a range because of variance in the number of respondents for each item within the subgroups presented. Asterisks (*) indicate a statistically significant difference ($p < 0.05$) between teachers in majority White schools and teachers in schools with a majority of students of color. Black bars represent 95-percent confidence intervals.

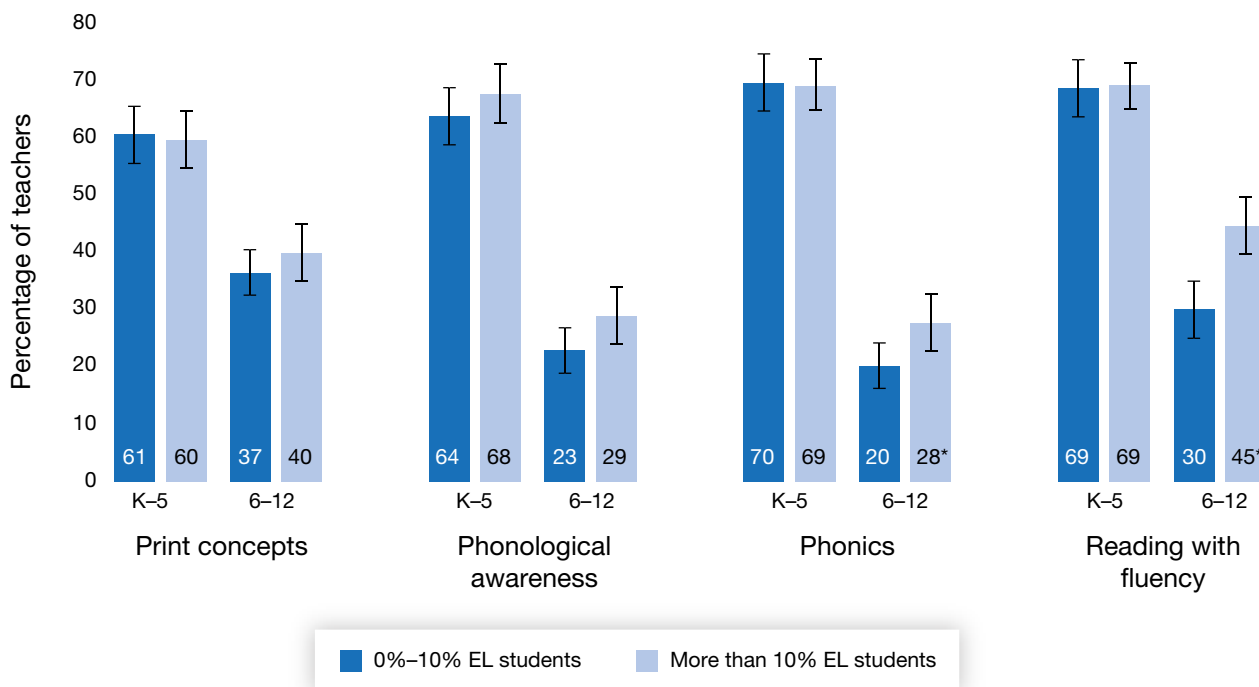
Secondary ELA Teachers in Classrooms in Which More Than 10 Percent Of Students Are ELs Were More Likely to Frequently Engage Students in Foundational Reading Activities Than Those Teaching 10 Percent or Fewer ELs

We found similar patterns among secondary ELA teachers who teach in classrooms with more than 10 percent ELs compared with those in classrooms with 10 percent or fewer ELs. Secondary ELA teachers in classrooms with more than 10 percent ELs were about 7 percentage points more likely to engage

students in foundational reading activities related to phonological awareness and phonics and word recognition and about 15 percentage points more likely to engage students in foundational reading activities related to fluency compared with their counterparts in classrooms with 10 percent or fewer ELs (Figure 4). However, these differences are not statistically significant at conventional alpha levels after controlling for school-level indicators of student race and poverty. We found no differences among elementary teachers. That is, teachers in classrooms in which more than 10 percent of students were ELs were just as likely as elementary teachers serving classes in which 10 per-

FIGURE 4

Percentage of Elementary and Secondary ELA Teachers Who Reported Frequently Engaging Students in Foundational Reading Activities in Classes with 10 Percent or Fewer ELs and More Than 10 Percent ELs



NOTE: This figure depicts response data from the following survey question: “In the last five lessons you taught this class (i.e., the past week, if you teach every day), how often did students engage in each of the following tasks, with or without your prompting?” Each bar represents the proportion of teachers who responded “3–4 lessons” or “every lesson.” Teachers who did not respond to the item or responded “Not relevant or not appropriate for the grade/class I teach” are excluded from the analysis. Print concepts is measured by the item “Practiced the organization or basic features of print.” Phonological awareness is measured by the items “Identified the units of oral language such as words, syllables, onset/rime, or phonemes” and “Manipulated units of oral language such as words, syllables, onset/rime, or phonemes.” Phonics is measured by the item “Applied phonics skills in recognizing or decoding words.” Fluency is measured by the item “Practiced reading with fluency (i.e., accuracy, rate appropriate to text and task, or with expression).” $n = 1,491\text{--}1,518$ for elementary ELA teachers; $n = 1,614\text{--}1,835$ for secondary ELA teachers. Sample sizes are presented as a range because of variance in the number of respondents for each item within the subgroups presented. Asterisks (*) indicate a statistically significant difference ($p < 0.05$) between teachers in classrooms with 10 percent or fewer ELs and teachers in classrooms with more than 10 percent ELs. Black bars represent 95-percent confidence intervals.

cent or fewer of students were ELs to engage in these foundational reading activities.

Taken together, these findings suggest that secondary ELA teachers serving higher proportions of students of color and ELs might perceive their students as having a greater need for reading instruction on foundational skills. Conversely, because developing foundational reading skills is a strong focus of elementary reading standards, elementary teachers might engage in these instructional activities regardless of the student population they serve.

Elementary Teachers in Classrooms in Which 10 Percent or More of Students Had IEPs Were Less Likely to Frequently Engage Students in Foundational Reading Activities Than Teachers with 10 Percent or Fewer of Students with IEPs

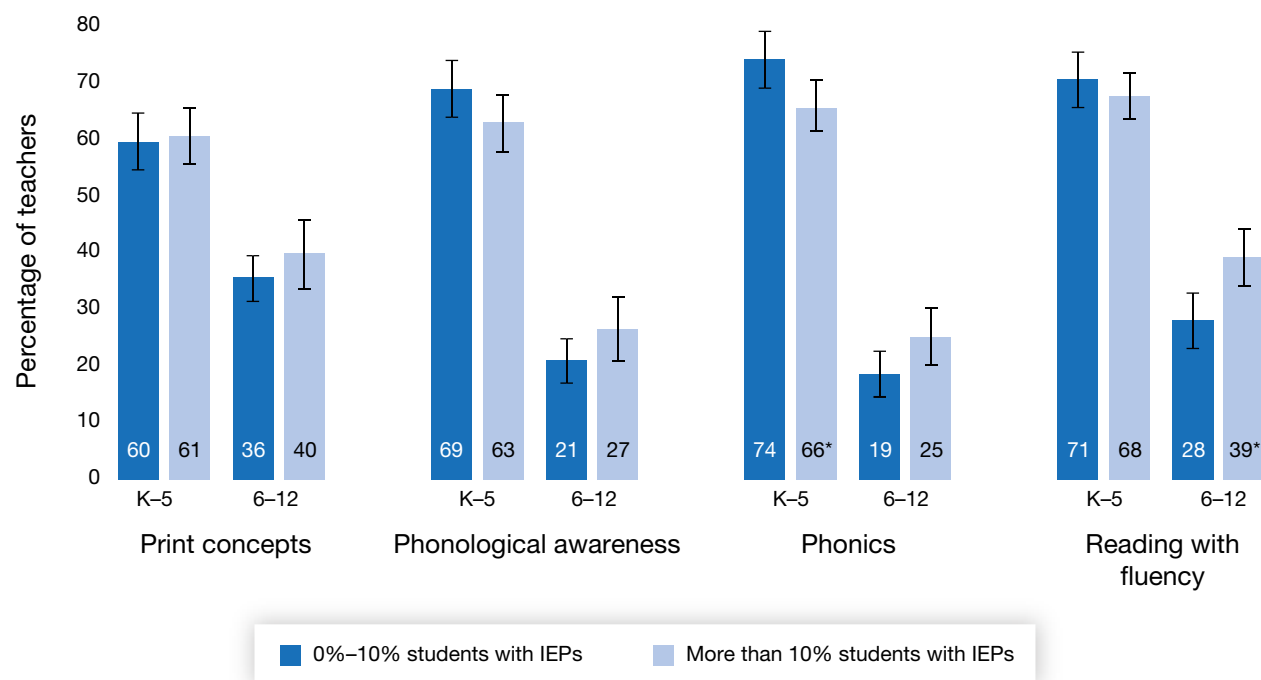
Although we did not find differences in elementary teachers engaging in foundational reading activities along most student characteristics, we found a surprising pattern among teachers with different proportions of students with IEPs. Among elementary school teachers, those with only a small proportion

of students with IEPs in their classrooms (10 percent or fewer) were *more* likely to frequently engage their students in foundational reading activities, particularly those related to phonological awareness and phonics and word recognition, than teachers with higher shares of students with IEPs (more than 10 percent of students) (Figure 5). This finding is somewhat surprising, given that we find no observable differences among elementary grade teachers by school-level race or classroom-level proportions of students with ELs.

To dig into these findings, we further disaggregated the data to compare the responses of teachers

with 10 percent to 24 percent, 25 percent to 49 percent, and more than 50 percent students with IEPs (Figure 6). These results provided some insight into our findings. Among elementary grade teachers, we found a U-shaped pattern: The percentage of teachers who reported engaging their students in foundational reading activities decreased as the share of students with IEPs increased but then increased among teachers with 50 percent or more students with IEPs. Among secondary teachers, we see a linear relationship in which the percentage of teachers who reported engaging in foundational reading activities increases as the share of students with IEPs

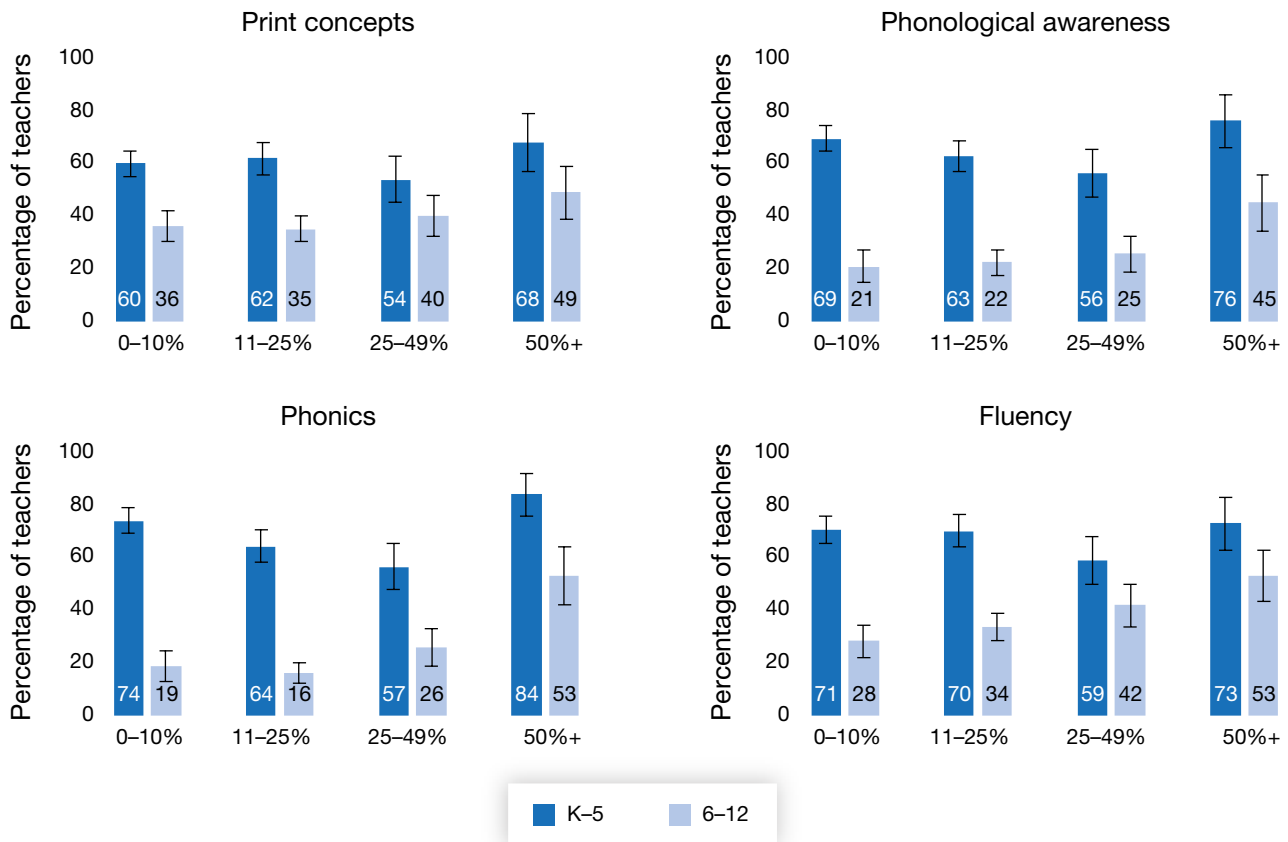
FIGURE 5
Percentage of Elementary and Secondary ELA Teachers Who Reported Frequently Engaging Students in Foundational Reading Activities in Classes with 10 Percent or Fewer Students with IEPs and More Than 10 Percent of Students with IEPs



NOTE: This figure depicts response data from the following survey question: “In the last five lessons you taught this class (i.e., the past week, if you teach every day), how often did students engage in each of the following tasks, with or without your prompting?” Each bar represents the proportion of teachers who responded “3–4 lessons” or “every lesson.” Teachers who did not respond to the item or responded “Not relevant or not appropriate for the grade/class I teach” are excluded from the analysis. Print concepts is measured by the item “Practiced the organization or basic features of print.” Phonological awareness is measured by the items “Identified the units of oral language such as words, syllables, onset/rime, or phonemes” and “Manipulated units of oral language such as words, syllables, onset/rime, or phonemes.” Phonics is measured by the item “Applied phonics skills in recognizing or decoding words.” Fluency is measured by the item “Practiced reading with fluency (i.e., accuracy, rate appropriate to text and task, or with expression).” $n = 1,491\text{--}1,518$ for elementary ELA teachers; $n = 1,614\text{--}1,835$ for secondary ELA teachers. Sample sizes are presented as a range due to variance in the number of respondents for each item within the subgroups presented. Asterisks (*) indicate a statistically significant difference ($p < 0.05$) between teachers in classrooms with 10 percent or fewer students with IEPs and teachers in classrooms with more than 10 percent of students with IEPs. Black bars represent 95-percent confidence intervals.

FIGURE 6

Percentage of Elementary and Secondary ELA Teachers Who Reported Frequently Engaging Students in Foundational Reading Activities, by the Share of Students with IEPs in Teachers' Classrooms



NOTE: This figure depicts response data from the following survey question: “In the last five lessons you taught this class (i.e., the past week, if you teach every day), how often did students engage in each of the following tasks, with or without your prompting?” Each bar represents the proportion of teachers who responded “3–4 lessons” or “every lesson.” Teachers who did not respond to the item or responded “Not relevant or not appropriate for the grade/class I teach” are excluded from the analysis. Print concepts is measured by the item “Practiced the organization or basic features of print.” Phonological awareness is measured by the items “Identified the units of oral language such as words, syllables, onset/rime, or phonemes” and “Manipulated units of oral language such as words, syllables, onset/rime, or phonemes.” Phonics is measured by the item “Applied phonics skills in recognizing or decoding words.” Fluency is measured by the item “Practiced reading with fluency (i.e., accuracy, rate appropriate to text and task, or with expression).” *n* = 1,491–1,518 for elementary ELA teachers; *n* = 1,614–1,835 for secondary ELA teachers. Sample sizes are presented as a range because of variance in the number of respondents for each item within the subgroups presented. Black bars represent 95-percent confidence intervals.

increases. As we discuss in more detail in the “Summary and Implications” section of this report, these findings might suggest that elementary grade teachers in ability-diverse classrooms (i.e., classrooms with between 10 percent and 49 percent students with IEPs) might be required to differentiate instruction in a way that leads to less frequent engagement in foundational reading activities for all of their students.

How Do Reading Activities Vary by Teachers' State Policy Context?

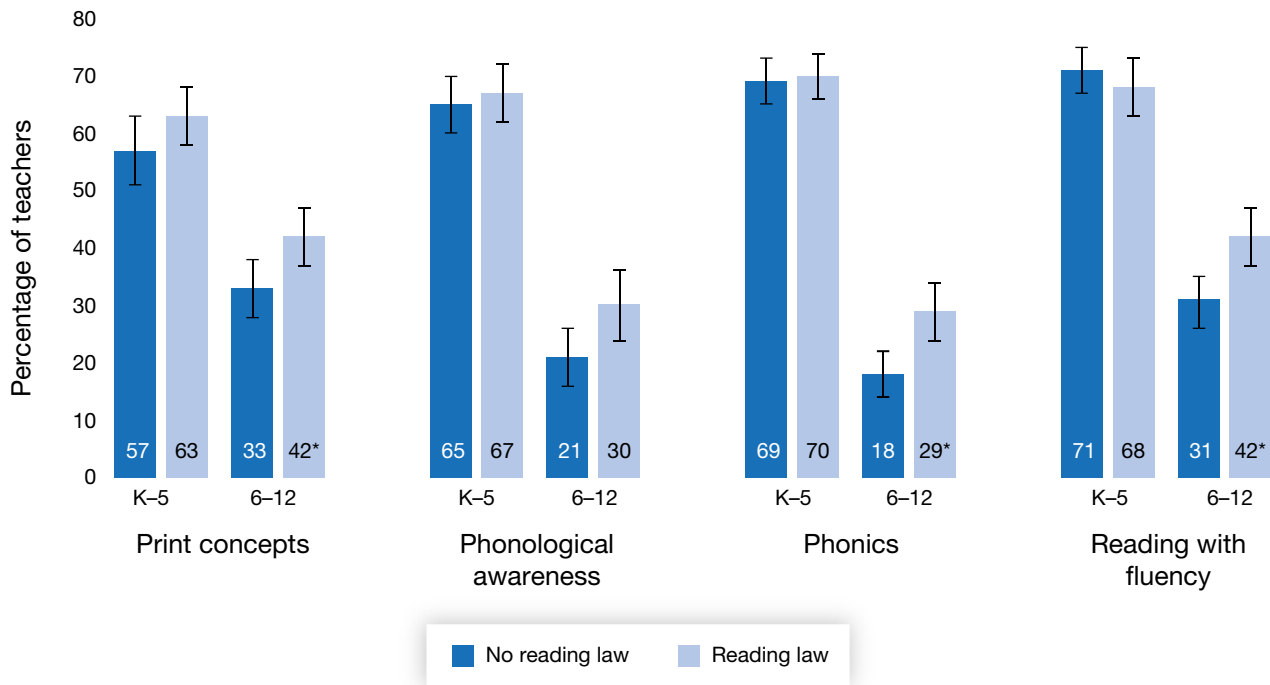
As we describe above, the majority of states have adopted Common Core standards, which outline what foundational reading skills students should have mastered in the elementary grades. Many states have also passed reading laws that outline how students should learn to read and specify requirements around how professional learning, coaching, and instruc-

tional materials should support teachers to develop students' foundational reading skills. When we compare the responses of teachers in states with and without reading laws (regardless of their adoption of the CCSS), we found that elementary ELA teachers in states with reading laws were just as likely as elementary ELA teachers in states without reading laws to frequently engage students in foundational reading activities. However, secondary ELA teachers in states with reading laws were significantly more likely (9–11 percentage points, $p < 0.001$) to frequently engage students in foundational reading activities than those in states without reading laws (Figure 7).

This pattern is puzzling at first glance, given that in the 30 states we classified as having reading

laws, only six have policies that extend to secondary ELA teachers' reading instruction (Schwartz, 2024).¹ In contrast, all 30 states place a heavy emphasis on policies that affect elementary grade teachers, among whom we observe no meaningful differences in practice. Given this incongruence, we interpret the secondary ELA teacher findings cautiously. It is possible that secondary ELA teachers in states with reading laws are more likely to frequently engage their students in foundational reading activities because of student needs. In other words, states might have enacted reading laws because of a perceived high need to support struggling readers, which is reflected in higher rates of secondary teachers frequently engaging their students in foundational

FIGURE 7
Percentage of K–12 ELA Teachers Who Reported Frequently Engaging Students in Foundational Reading Activities, in States With and Without Reading Laws



NOTE: This figure depicts response data from the following survey question: “In the last five lessons you taught this class (i.e., the past week, if you teach every day), how often did students engage in each of the following tasks, with or without your prompting?” Each bar represents the proportion of teachers who responded “3–4 lessons” or “every lesson.” Teachers who did not respond to the item or responded “Not relevant or not appropriate for the grade/class I teach” are excluded from the analysis. Print concepts is measured by the item “Practiced the organization or basic features of print.” Phonological awareness is measured by the items “Identified the units of oral language such as words, syllables, onset/rime, or phonemes” and “Manipulated units of oral language such as words, syllables, onset/rime, or phonemes.” Phonics is measured by the item “Applied phonics skills in recognizing or decoding words.” Fluency is measured by the item “Practiced reading with fluency (i.e., accuracy, rate appropriate to text and task, or with expression).” $n = 1,507$ – $1,534$ for elementary ELA teachers; $n = 1,622$ – $1,845$ for secondary ELA teachers. Sample sizes are presented as a range due to variance in the number of respondents for each item within the subgroups presented. Asterisks (*) indicate a statistically significant difference ($p < 0.05$) between teachers in states with reading laws and teachers in states without reading laws. Figure 1 shows states with and without reading laws. Black bars represent 95-percent confidence intervals.

reading activities. Furthermore, the variability of these laws across states might lead to noisy comparisons between states with and without this legislation (Neuman, Quintero, and Reist, 2023).

Summary and Implications

Our findings show that ELA teachers reported engaging their students in foundational reading activities across all grade levels, including middle and high school grades. Unsurprisingly, K–1 teachers most frequently engaged their students in foundational reading activities, followed by grades 2–5 teachers. However, we also found that relatively high proportions of middle and high school ELA teachers engaged their students in foundational reading activities, particularly those teaching in schools with a majority of students of color and those teaching in classrooms in which more than 10 percent of students are ELs. Meanwhile, we observed few differences across elementary teachers serving different student populations, with one exception: Elementary teachers serving ability-diverse classrooms (i.e., classrooms in which 10 percent to 49 percent of students have IEPs) were *less* likely to frequently engage their students in foundational reading activities, compared with their counterparts serving more homogeneous classrooms with either very small or very large proportions of student with IEPs.

Finally, we examined whether teachers' frequent engagement of students in foundational reading activities varied by their state policy context. We found that secondary ELA teachers in states with reading laws, regardless of Common Core standards adoption, were more likely than their counterparts in states without reading laws to report frequently engaging their students in foundational reading activities, even though only about one-quarter of states with reading laws include requirements around ELA instruction in secondary grades. Meanwhile, we again observed no differences between the reports of elementary teachers in states with and without reading laws. We share our implications based on these findings in the following sections.

Relatively high proportions of middle and high school ELA teachers engaged their students in foundational reading activities, particularly those teaching in schools with a majority of students of color and those teaching in classrooms in which more than 10 percent of students are ELs.

Some Secondary ELA Teachers—Especially Those Serving High Proportions of Students of Color and ELs—Might Benefit from More Resources to Support Instruction Targeting Foundational Reading Skills

Results from the 2022 NAEP reading assessment indicate that about one-third of public-school 8th grade students are below the NAEP Basic level in reading proficiency (Nation's Report Card, 2022). Perhaps it is unsurprising, then, that our results suggest that a sizable proportion of secondary teachers continue to engage their students in the development of foundational reading skills.

We find that elementary ELA teachers in classrooms with a smaller-than-average proportion of students with IEPs were more likely than their counterparts serving higher proportions of students with IEPs to frequently engage their students in foundational reading activities.

Given that many secondary teachers are engaging their students in activities that explicitly target foundational reading skills, these educators might benefit from similar resources as those provided to elementary grade teachers to better serve their students who struggle with reading proficiency. For example, providing teachers with high-quality professional development on evidence-based reading practices has been shown to improve reading achievement among elementary and middle grade students (Didion, Toste, and Filderman, 2019). Evidence also supports explicit instruction in building students' decoding skills and purposeful fluency-building activities for students in grades 4–9 (Vaughn et al., 2022).

However, we also acknowledge that not all secondary ELA teachers will require more support around foundational reading activities. In considering how they can differentiate supports for secondary ELA teachers, policymakers might attend in particular to secondary teachers who serve larger

populations of students of color and ELs. Currently, relatively few states emphasize supports for specific student groups, such as ELs or students experiencing poverty (Neuman, Quintero, and Reist, 2023). States and school systems might also consider how they can create systems to support differentiated instruction to meet students' specific needs. For example, elementary grades frequently offer reading interventions through Response to Intervention (RTI), a form of a multi-tiered support system that is designed to intervene at the earliest signs that a child is struggling to learn to read and can improve reading achievement (Gersten et al., 2020). Investing in more-robust implementation of RTI in middle and high school grades for all students who are struggling with reading, not just students with disabilities, might help support secondary grade teachers as well (Epler, 2015).

Teachers in Ability-Diverse Classrooms in Elementary Grades Might Engage All Their Students in Foundational Reading Activities Less Frequently

We found that elementary ELA teachers in classrooms with a lower-than-average proportion of students with IEPs were more likely than their counterparts serving higher proportions of students with IEPs to frequently engage their students in foundational reading activities. At first glance, this finding is potentially concerning; several meta-analyses of reading intervention evaluations that focus on foundational reading skills have found that teaching these skills can be effective for students with disabilities (Wanzek et al., 2016). However, we also found suggestive evidence that teachers in classrooms with higher-than-average proportion of students with IEPs (more than 50 percent) also frequently engage their students in these activities. Importantly, we cannot determine the extent to which individual students with and without IEPs are engaging in foundational reading activities. For this reason, we interpret these results as providing insight into how classroom composition might be related to the overall frequency with which teachers engage their students in these activi-

ties rather than indicating inequities in foundational reading activities for students with IEPs specifically.

Notably, teachers were asked about engaging *all* students in foundational reading activities. It is possible that teachers in ability-diverse classrooms (i.e., classrooms in which 10 percent to 49 percent of students have IEPs) engage in more differentiated instruction that targets these activities to struggling readers both with and without IEPs. Evidence suggests that many approaches to differentiated reading instruction, such as targeted small group instruction that provides individualized student feedback, can be highly effective strategies for students both with and without IEPs in general education classrooms (Burns et al., 2020; Connor et al., 2009; Puzio, Colby, and Algeo-Nichols, 2020). Intensive interventions provided by trained specialists for struggling readers, both with and without disabilities, also show promising results (Kamil et al., 2008). If teachers in classrooms in which many students have IEPs are engaging in more differentiated instruction, this could explain our findings. Alternatively, these teachers might be teaching in inclusion classrooms that provide teacher aides to support students with IEPs. If so, students might be engaging in foundational reading activities with the support of classroom aides instead.

It Might Take Time for States to Observe the Impacts of Policy Shifts on Teachers' Instruction

Although the adoption of evidence-based foundational reading skill standards and the passage of reading laws support nationwide efforts to turn to more evidence-based practices of reading instruction, states might need to wait to observe meaningful shifts in teachers' instruction. Because it might take time for states to see meaningful changes to teachers' instruction, it might also take time for states to see meaningful improvements in students' reading performance on assessments such as NAEP or state standardized tests. For example, Mississippi saw substantial improvement in its 2019 NAEP reading score compared with its 2013 reading outcomes (Barnum, 2023). However, Mississippi's adoption of

the Common Core standards was coupled with legislation that provided considerable funding to support teachers' implementation of science-based reading approaches (Kaufman, 2022).

How states design initiatives to support the adoption and implementation of the CCSS at the local level, as well as how reading laws are implemented, will be crucial for improving student outcomes. Neuman, Quintero, and Reist (2023) provides a set of recommendations that might strengthen the implementation and outcomes of states' reading laws. The authors recommend that states consider how they promote the selection of high-quality curricula aligned to evidence-based approaches, develop the knowledge and capacity of school leaders to support evidence-based reading instruction in their schools, and consider how different components of the system that support reading instruction (e.g., curricula, professional development, family and community engagement, school leadership, teacher preparation) align and cohere with each other (Neuman, Quintero, and Reist, 2023).

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Research Limitations

This report provides a snapshot of the frequency with which ELA teachers are engaging their students in foundational reading activities. However, there are several limitations that readers should consider when interpreting the results that we present in this report. First, our analysis of teachers' responses to survey items relies on teachers' self-reports. These self-reports rely on teachers' recollection of the activities in which they engaged students over the course of their last five lessons. Furthermore, how "last five lessons" was interpreted might vary; for example, some teachers teach multiple ELA lessons over the course of the day. If so, the last five lessons might have occurred in the past day or two. For teachers who teach one ELA lesson per day, the last five lessons might have occurred over the course of the past five days.

Second, we asked teachers about four specific activities aligned with the Common Core standards for foundational reading skills (print concepts, phonological awareness, phonics and word recognition, and fluency), only one of which (fluency) extends into higher grade standards. Among those skills specific to early grades, teachers might not have understood these items in the same way across grade levels. In particular, secondary ELA teachers might

have interpreted the skills differently than elementary school teachers. For example, secondary ELA teachers might have interpreted the item "practice the organization or basic features of print" differently than elementary ELA teachers, thinking of more complex skills such as reading an appendix, graph, or other features of text. Thus, we suggest that readers interpret the results in this report with caution because we do not have a clear understanding of how each teacher might have understood the items.

Third, it is possible that other factors unmeasured by this survey could have contributed to the differences that we observe between teacher subgroups. For instance, we do not have measures of student reading achievement, which might be correlated with both students' characteristics and how frequently teachers engaged students in foundational reading activities. We believe these are potential areas for future research.

Fourth, our analysis presents sample means and cannot be used to draw causal inferences. For example, although we find differences among secondary ELA teachers in states with and without reading laws, we cannot say that the passage of these laws caused the differences we observe. Rather, these findings suggest patterns that can be used to inform future research into the impact of these laws.

How This Analysis Was Conducted

In this report, we used responses from 3,505 ELA teachers from the 2023 AIRS to examine how ELA teachers were using early reading practices in their instruction. We focused our analysis on one close-ended question: “In the last five lessons you taught this class (i.e., the past week, if you teach every day), how often did students engage in each of the following tasks, with or without your prompting?” The activities we asked about were “Practiced the organization or basic features of print,” “Identified units of oral language such as words, syllables, onset/rime, or phonemes,” “Manipulated units of oral language such as words, syllables, onset/rime, or phonemes,” “Applied phonics skills in recognizing or decoding words,” and “Practiced reading with fluency (i.e., accuracy, rate appropriate to text and task, or with expression).” For each activity, teachers were able to respond, “Never,” “1–2 lessons,” “3–4 lessons,” “Every lesson,” or “Not relevant or not appropriate for the grade/class I teach.”

Additional information about this question is included in *American Instructional Resources Survey: 2023 Technical Documentation and Survey Results* (Doan et al., 2023).

Throughout this report, we report sample-wide and subgroup-specific means and proportions of variables of interest, weighted using a set of nationally representative weights described in detail in the AIRS technical documentation (Doan et al., 2023). To compare responses for teachers in schools with different demographic profiles, we matched AIRS responses to school-level data from the 2020–2021 Common Core of Data (National Center for Education Statistics, undated). We explored whether teachers’ responses differed to their grade band (K–1, 2–5, 6–8, 9–12), student demographic characteristics, and their state policy context. Unless otherwise noted, we reference only differences among educator subgroups that are statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). We tested the robustness of significant differences among teachers with a majority students of colors by controlling for school poverty level. These regression analyses are useful for understanding the drivers of differences, but we do not present regression-adjusted statistics because we believe that these teacher subgroup differences remain notable even if they could be driven by multiple underlying factors. Moreover, we did not make statistical adjustments for multiple comparisons because the intent of this report is to provide exploratory, descriptive information rather than to test specific hypotheses or causal relationships.

Note

¹ For instance, Kentucky requires all K–12 teachers to provide explicit instruction for struggling readers (Kentucky Senate Bill 9, 2022). Rhode Island requires that secondary teachers in special education, reading specialists, and teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages must be trained in evidence-based reading approaches (State of Rhode Island Department of Education, 2019).

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About This Report

Drawing on the spring 2023 American Instructional Resources Survey, the authors examine teachers' use of foundational reading activities in their instruction. The American Educator Panels (AEP) are nationally representative samples of teachers, school leaders, and district leaders across the country. The panels are a proud member of the American Association for Public Opinion Research's Transparency Initiative. For more information about any one of the survey panels, visit www.rand.org/aep.

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